[John B. Culbertson]

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: JOHN B. CULBERTSON

Date of First Writing January 27, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed John B. Culberton (white farmer and landowner)

Fictitious Name None

Address Campobello, Route #2

Occupation Farmer

Name of Writers R. V. Williams

Name of Reviser State Office John B. Culbertson

The immaculate white bungalow of the Culbertson family is situated about three miles northwest of Campobello an a country road, and represents the successful efforts of a man who, like many other farmers in the northern section of Spartanburg County, has realized the value of diversification of crops. He is John B. Culbertson, who was born September 27, 1890, on the same farm which he now owns. “Count” is his nickname.

“I had a rather tough boyhood,” Mr. Culbertson said. “My mother died when I was three years old. I don't remember her. At that time, Dad's sister, Aunt Emma Culbertson, lived with us. We lived in an old two-story frame house which is now a part of my barn. Aunt Emma took care of me after my mother's death, and she is responsible for my nickmame.

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When I was born, she told everybody that I was the prettiest baby in the county, and, up until the time of her death, she often remarked that I was the prettiest baby that she had ever seen. Early during my boyhood, my friends began to call me 'County.' The nickname eventually changed to 'Count,' and I doubt seriously 2 if there is a half dozen neighbors of mine who know my real name. They all call me Count.

“My father was what you might call an ordinary farmer. He had been born on a farm, and used the same methods in farming that his father had taught him. He bought thirty acres of this tract before I was born. And one of my earliest recollections is that of my father telling my aunt that he didn't see how he was going to be able to meet the interest on the mortgage.

“I don't remember what we got for farm products during my boyhood, but I do know that it wasn't so much. I started to school when I was seven years old, but as I grew older, there were many times that Dad kept me at home to help out because he was unable to pay for help. As a result of staying out of school so much, I didn't reach the sixth grade until I was sixteen years old. I kept on going to school until I was eighteen. Then I had to quit because Dad was getting too old to do the work.

“I took almost complete charge of the farm in 1909. Dad was too feeble to do any of the heavy work. He had two mules, a cow, and a couple of hogs then. It took me from daylight to dark to get my work done. Cotton was the money crop, and it began to go up. But we didn't use the modern methods of producing cotton then. I did very little terracing on the hill-sides then, and fertilizer was almost unknown. I was lucky to get a bale for every two acres. I made a little off of corn, but most the crop went to keep up the stock. I had to hire help to plant, hoe, and harvest my crop. The first year that I had complete charge of the farm, I ended up with seventy-five dollars in cash after I had paid the taxes, a small amount on the principal of the mortgage, and the other expenses.

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“But despite the fact that the farm required most of my time, I did find time to do some courting. On Christmas Day, 1909, I married Mary 3 Brannon. I'd known her almost all of my life. This Christmas will make thirty years for us, and whatever I may be today, I owe any success that I have had to Mary. She's the greatest wife any man ever had.

“Mary took over the household as soon as we were married. Dad and Aunt Emma were crazy about here, and she handled them like babies. Besides looking after the house, she took charge of the gardens and, with what help I could give her, we began to produce more things than we could use. Her father gave her two young heifers when we were married, and they were soon giving milk. And she set [?] and looked after the chickens. On Saturdays we would drive to Landrum or Tryon and sell our produce. It's about twenty miles from the farm to Spartanburg and we rarely ever went there in those days, for the roads were pretty bad. We bought supplies at Landrum or at Tryon. And sometimes we would send things in by neighbors to sell for us. That extra money helped out lots.

“Dad died in 1911 after a short illness. Being the only child, naturally I inherited the farm, and, I might say, also the mortgage. Dad was sixty-nine when he died, and less than two months after his death, Aunt Emma died. Dad left me a thousand dollars in insurance, but aunt Emma had none. The cost of the burials made a big hole in the insurance money. On top of that, John, Junior, was born in July, a month after Aunt Emma had died. Because of Mary's condition, our doctor advised us to have the baby born in a hospital. That bill was no small amount. And I had to hire a woman to stay at the house until Mary got well. The year 1911 took away Dad and Aunt Emma and gave me a farm and a mortgage.

“The next few years saw us gradually getting out of the hole. I learned better methods of farming. I subscribed to several farm magazines and studied them at night. The Clemson College Extension Service sent me bulletins, and 4 county agents began to come along with a lot of helpful advice. The family grew, too. Thomas was born in 1912, Mary in 1913, and Elizabeth in 1914. By 1915, I had cut down the mortgage from $2,000 in 1911 to

$1,100. I wasn't making a fortune, but we were getting along, and managing to save a little.

“Contrary to what you might thing, the war, and the boom days that followed it didn't help me out so much. I got lots more for my crops, but they were rather poor during those years. And it was almost impossible to hire help. That help you could get cost so much that it was almost prohibitive to employ anyone.

“I almost went broke in 1920 and '21. The boll weevil. We didn't know how to fight it then, and it was heart-breaking to see a good crop go down. Some of my neighbors just gave up and moved away. You could get farm land for almost nothing. It was impossible for me to meet my notes, but the bank was kind enough to let me get by with just the interest. And I had to scrape to do that.

“County Agent Carnes had been preaching diversification of crops to me, but my ears were filled with cotton. About 1922, he urged me to plant a few acres of peaches for commercial purposes. I couldn't see it. With a number of other farmers, he took us over to Gramling to look at the small orchard Ben Gramling had planted. Mr. Gramling hadn't been so optimistic about the peach idea either, but he and a few of his neighbors had planted small orchards a year or two before. They had changed their minds when we made our tour. The tress were growing rapidly, and sturdy and strong. All of us except a few old die-hards were impressed.

“At home, I talked the situation over with Mary. It seems funny now, but it was a serious problem then. It meant giving up acres of land that 5 I had been using for cotton, my money crop, for five or six years, with no return from the land and a lot of expense in taking care of the trees. We discussed it for days, and I talked it over with other farmers in my section. Finally, I decided to make the plunge. In the fall of 1923, I planted ten acres in peach tress. Then, I worried myself almost to death for a year, wondering if I hadn't made a mistake. But I was determined to go through with it. Lots of neighbors were doing

the same thing as I was, and we were all going to sink or swim together. Some of our friends who didn't plant tress gave us plenty of kidding. They would say that we were tying up “money” land for five years for nothing; that we didn't know whether or not peaches for commercial purposes could be grown in this county; and we had no market for our product, and that the Georgia market was so large that we would never be able to sell our peaches at a profit even if our trees did produce marketable peaches. And about all we could say to them was 'just wait and see.'

“I was forced to go further in debt the next year when I planted about ten more acres in peaches. I read everything I could get about peaches. We had books from the County Agent's office, and from other agricultural departments. Then, several of us made trips to Georgia to study the methods they used. In the daytime, I lived peaches, and at night I dreamed peaches. Sometimes, I felt that I had made a great mistake. The kids were growing up, and expenses were higher.

“When Ben Gramling and his friends shipped their first peaches—I think it was in 1925—I sure did feel relieved. I think they got two dollars a bushel that year. And their orchards demonstrated the fact that peaches grown here come in just after the Georgia season is over and just before the Eastern North Carolina season opens. I immediately went further in debt by planting more trees.

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“My first big crop came in 1929. It was a good year and we got an average of two dollars and a half a bushel. Since that time, I've been a peach man, but it's not so easy as it sounds. There has been good years and bad years since that time, and the cost of production goes on regardless of what happens to your crop.

“The growing of peaches for commercial purposes is a gamble. In the first place, commercial peach orchards require year-around attention, and that is no small item. Then a frost might get you when the trees are in bloom, and that means no peaches. Or it might

rain and freeze the water in the buds, and that means no peaches. And some insect that we never heard of before comes along about every other year—it seems to me— that we have to fight to save our crop. Then we may have an early crop that will come in just when the Georgia crop is in season, which means a low price. Or a late crop that conflicts with the North Carolina market. Or a hail storm that leaves bruised spots and makes the peach unfit for shipping because the spots turn into rot before the peach is ready to be shipped. To sum it all up, this business of growing peaches is one big headache. But I love it."

Mr. Clubertson Culbertson built his bungalow in 1935. He moved the former house into the back, enlarged it, and converted it into a barn. A white gravel path leads from the road up to the cottage, which is furnished with all modern conveniences.

Mr. and Mrs. Culbertson are fond of their children. John, Junior, finished Wofford College in 1933; took a course in law at the University of North Carolina, and is now practicing at Lanoir, N. C. Thomas finished Clemson College in 1935, and is now assisting his father in managing the farm. Mary married Mr. John Staton, and they, with their baby girl, reside with the Culbertsons, Mr. Staton taking part in caring for the farm.

Elizabeth, unmarried, also lives with the family.

"I have about sixty acres in the home tract," Mr. Culbertson said, "and I own half-interest in a twenty-acre tract near Landrum. I'm still in debt, but there's nothing pushing me. About half of this tract is in peaches. We grow some cotton—about ten acres—and some corn, irish and sweet potatoes, and, I guess, about anything else that will grow in this county. We have two mules, a tractor, and the usual farm equipment. John, Junior, me and my daughter's husband have cars.

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“I have just about turned everything over to the boys, but there is always plenty for me to do. As far as that is concerned, you just have to keep busy when you are growing peaches.

“I spend most of my spare time reading. I have always regretted the fact that I was unable to go to college, but I have read lots, especially during the past few years.

“That's about all I can say, except I'm hoping for my biggest peach crop next year. I have about ten acres that are coming in for the first time.”